

ANALYSIS

"One against Thebes" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"One against Thebes,' a revision of an earlier story ('Summer Dust') looks provocatively like the germ of the plan for these two novels. In this story a child (the writer herself) pursues her path down a dusty road, with her shadow, a Negro girl, and a kind of Demeter figure, a Negro woman carrying a basket in which she is to gather peaches. A black boy runs beside the two children, making a trail in the dust which 'might have been made by a great snake, a serpent as large as any one of them, hurling itself now to one side of the road, now to the other....' The child thinks 'how she and the other girl and the boy and even the old woman seem to move in its coils.'

Mythological materials are linked in this story with the child's present experiences, which take on the aspect of a journey and a quest. There is the story of 'Son' killing a snake when he was a year old, as Hercules strangled the serpents in his cradle; there are the Greek myths of Heracles, Erectheus, and the dragon's teeth recounted by the child's father (Aleck Maury) to a skeptical brother, Tom; there is also a visit to see the ancient Aunt Emily, who is said to drink blood, like Tiresias and the other greedy shades inhabiting the underworld. The child sees her own progress down the dusty road as a quest for the 'crystal palace' of a fairytale, where there will be a gold crown, silver slippers '*and a veil of silver tissue, embroidered with the sun and the moon and the stars....*' If she can make her way through the obstacles in her path, she will end by attaining a union with the entire cosmos.

Miss Gordon prefaces her story with a passage from *Oedipus at Colonus*: 'That way you shall forever hold this city, / Safe from the men of Thebes, the dragon's sons' (translation by Robert Fitzgerald). Oedipus is the speaker of these lines, to Theseus, the noble king of Athens, who has provided the protection for the old wanderer at the end of his days. Thebes, the city from which Oedipus has been exiled, was founded by men who sprang up from dragon's teeth sown by Cadmus and has been ever since a center of internecine conflict, incredible suffering, and misfortune. In the drama, a few lines after the passage quoted, Oedipus speaks of being driven 'by an insistent voice that comes from God.' He has followed his vocation, then, in coming to the sacred grove of the Furies and says farewell to life with dignity and selflessness, absorbed, one feels, into the bosom of the gods.

One can only speculate on Miss Gordon's choice of title; but since it speaks quite clearly of the life dedicated to following 'an insistent voice,' it seems possible to consider her story a parable of the artist, following a vocation in the path of the serpent, seeking the crystal palace, encountering undeserved suffering, and redeemed finally from the doomed city of Thebes to bless the fortunate and just city of Athens. It is the child herself who will become the 'one against Thebes'; but at the same time her father, Aleck Maury, like the aging Oedipus is also in a sense pitted against the forces of death and destruction. The child--in the earlier story Sally Maury, the daughter of Aleck--is here referred to simply as 'the child.' She is the young artist, called by an inner voice to a life of observation, of absorption, of re-mythologizing.

Like the little girl in 'A Narrow Heart: The Portrait of a Woman' (*The Transatlantic Review*, Spring 1960), she is preoccupied with the qualities of things, with trying to know them as they are and as they establish themselves in consciousness. As an Antigone figure, she will have to guide and direct the humbled Oedipus and later take the part of the gods in struggle against the rationalistic edicts of Thebes and will help to keep the city safe from the dragon's sons. But the artist is not, in Miss Gordon's view, the hero. The artist--the poet--is a seer, whose consciousness gives form to the total history of man. True, he observes the hero and appreciates him, understanding his courage and his mission because both have an inner voice to guide them, both are aware of dragons, both stand solitary over the abyss. Nevertheless, the artist has a different kind of toil: to construct an image of that essentially epic struggle. And though in this

story Miss Gordon's referential imagination allies the child's father with the tragic figure of the old Oedipus, her view of him throughout the Aleck Maury stories has been cast in an epic, not a tragic, mold."

Louise Cowan

"Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim"

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 11-13

"Miss Gordon's earliest published story, 'Summer Dust,' later revised and retitled 'One Against Thebes,' illustrates her early and persistent concern with the theme of sexual role. Neither version is properly a story of love, but in both the subject is a young girl's awakening to the mystery of her natural place as a woman, a place which will involve her in love. In both also the child is confronted with the stress that attends the first impact of experience upon youthful innocence. The two versions are essentially the same story, but in modifying her earlier work Miss Gordon has sharpened somewhat the conflict implicit in the fable.... In both versions of the story the critical moment in the movement from innocence to experience involves the girl's exposure to the realities of senility and death...

The sexual role is misconceived by the girl who seems to view her femininity as a bastion serving somehow as a permanent safeguard against experience. Inviolable innocence in its sexual and intellectual aspects is the 'city' which she must hold intact, safe from the depredations of men who are the issue of the reptilian principle, the principle of evil and limitation. The girl has even discerned the way by means of which she may hold fast to her delusion and resist the incursions of experience. Her strategy, as the concluding passage of the story suggests, is the cunning use of fancy for the purpose of withdrawal and spiritual insulation.

The Coleridgean [Samuel Taylor Coleridge] distinction between imagination and that lesser faculty [fancy] displays a new significance here, for one can see that the child's failure consists precisely in her refusal to use the resources of imagination in the proper, natural manner. Instead of attempting to discern through imagination the pattern inherent in her new experience--a pattern at once distressing yet natural, and, ultimately good--the girl seeks refuge in the crystal palace of her day-dream. Here the operation of fancy amounts to an improper use of the imagination to secure a spurious power and freedom, an operation opposed to its proper use which is as a means of ordering knowledge. When the girl thus chooses to employ the dubious magic of fancy she precludes the fruition of the woman hitherto potential in her. She refuses to accept her sexual role and with that her human role.

The child herself is of course the 'one' of the title who opposes her will to persist in the innocence and freedom of the child's world against the knowledge and responsibility latent in 'Thebes,' the corporate adult world of experience and innocence outgrown.... 'One Against Thebes' is not tragic, but it conveys an intensely pathetic image of willfully arrested maturity. Its pathos derives partly from the realization that so much depends on the first motions of youth when the young person is not really prepared for such perilous, decisive action. Miss Gordon seems to require considerable instinctive wisdom of her feminine characters, even the very young ones. Yet one is not tempted to quarrel with the stringency of her expectation which seems just, after all, like some of the more rigorous laws of nature.

What finally accounts for the pathos of the story is perhaps one's feeling that the girl's withdrawal carries the implication of an irrevocable choice, like one of those seemingly trivial yet, in retrospect, fatal transgressions that are recalled by some of Dante's interlocutors in the *Inferno*. The epigraph says 'That way you shall forever hold this city.' Its implication is that the way of fancy though self-defeating is prodigiously resourceful. The girl has already given away her *Green Fairy Book* and may in time forget the charm with which she now conjures away her recent experiences. But the fancy can find other forms and, given the girl's present disposition, its operation probably will continue to enable her to reject her intended place in the scheme of things.

The girl's failure in 'One Against Thebes' is of the most elemental order. She simply refuses to accept her part within the natural continuity of renewal and maturity to which she has been lately introduced. By so doing she rejects one of the cardinal teachings of the 'Forest'--the injunction to accept freely one's place

within the mystery of nature's ordinance and to serve the final goodness of purpose that such cooperation entails. Somewhat after the manner of 'One Against Thebes' a separable group of Caroline Gordon's stories about love deals with similar elemental failures to fulfill a sexual role. However, the stories which comprise this group--'The Petrified Woman,' 'Brilliant Leaves,' 'All Lovers Love the Spring'--are concerned primarily with...the stress between the sexes'."

John E. Alvis
"The Idea of Nature and the Sexual Role in Caroline Gordon's Early Stories of Love"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 88, 90, 92-93

"'One Against Thebes,' a rewritten version of Caroline Gordon's first published story, 'Summer Dust,' is interesting for several reasons. Essentially, 'One Against Thebes' is the same story told in 'Summer Dust'; but it is reorganized, rather severely cut, and considerably heightened in tone. By judicious reselection of detail, by conversion of a number of highly colloquial and dialect expressions into more formal English, and by the insertion into the body of the story several allusions to classical myth, Miss Gordon has converted a loosely constructed realistic story into a highly suggestive poetic one.

'One Against Thebes' is about evil, as was 'Summer Dust'; but the evil has been given a historical-mythical basis in addition to a Naturalistic one [Modernist synthesis]. The reference to Thebes and to Heracles are intended to place a small girl, the protagonist, in a tradition which the author sees as coming in a straight line from Classical times down to our own day. For many readers, the connection between Heracles and a small girl in the twentieth-century rural South may seem farfetched, but Miss Gordon has managed to join these in a convincing relationship. She accomplishes this parallel outside the story through the title 'One Against Thebes' and by the epigraph, 'That you shall forever hold this city safe from the men of Thebes, the dragon's sons.'

But the connection is made within the story by the child's father who is learned in Classical literature and who bridges the two worlds by expressing in his idiomatic English the truth of the Greek myths and their applicability as paradigms for our own times. The Thebans were said to have descended from dragons and their early ancestors to have serpent's coils. When the child's brother rejects this statement with 'I wouldn't want to be made out of no snake's teeth...' the father replies: 'It's none of your business, Sir, how you are made.... Snaps and snails and puppy dogs' tails I've been told.'

Miss Gordon's story suggests that, if modern men do not have serpent's tails, they are nevertheless capable of behaving with serpentine cunning. This suggestion is pointed up early in the story through the description of Son, the Negro boy, who runs from one side of the road to another making a trail like a serpent in the coils of which the child and her other Negro companion are following. Man's capacity for evil is also emphasized by the events of the story itself in which character after character commits some act of cruelty and spite against a fellow mortal. The only redeemed person in the story is the child who is inspired through a fairy-story book to do something generous and who envisions a world better than the one through which she must walk. She gives her fairy-tale book to the Negro boy Son--slips it into his pocket, not wanting to be seen or thanked and knowing that she will never see it again. At the end of the story, as she goes along the road kicking up the summer dust, she deliberately recalls the words of the fairy godmother from one of her fairy tales, describing a fairy-tale paradise.

'One Against Thebes' not only is interesting as an effective short story, it is also a useful lesson in the art of fiction when put along side 'Summer Dust.' More important, is what 'One Against Thebes' tells us about Miss Gordon's career: it shows that, though her fiction underwent significant changes after her religious conversion, the religious implication was already present in her first published short story."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 133-34

"Her new approach to fiction, with its central union of archetypal and Christian vision, did not fully emerge until her story 'One Against Thebes' (1961, originally entitled 'The Dragon's Teeth'), which is a

rewritten version of her first published story, 'Summer Dust' (1929). Both versions are about a young girl confronting the disillusioning knowledge that comes with growing up, but there are some important differences, which reveal Gordon's new interests. The original story follows the basic plot pattern of her early work, with a character, here Sally Maury, confronting the chaotic nature of life with no satisfactory way in which to order it. When Sally has the upsetting experiences of overhearing a tenant call her parents ugly names and her brother and a friend talk about sexual adventure, she retreats into the comforting world of fairy tale. But her fairy-tale vision is finally an inadequate guide for growing up, because it is a retreat from life and provides no realistic interpretation of it. The story ends with her mind drifting from the hot summer into a pleasant dream world, where a fairy godmother promises to lead her, the little princess, away on a cloud to a distant crystal palace.

"One Against Thebes' also ends with the young girl (she is not named here) having a similar fairy-tale vision, but with a crucial difference. In this later story, the girl prefaces the vision with the observation that she will never see her fairy tale book again because she has given it away; referring to the vision, she says it is a mere remembrance of words. Unlike Sally Maury in 'Summer Dust,' who retreats to the fairy-tale world for safety, the young girl in 'One Against Thebes' has outgrown fairy tales and in her vision gives them only one last backward glance. The story suggests that this girl (unlike Sally Maury) will go on to order her life around her knowledge of archetypal experience, just as her father, a classics scholar, does. She reveals her already strong awareness of archetypal knowledge when she watches a boy make snakelike marks with his feet in the dusty road....

With this knowledge, the girl does not retreat from life, but attempts to plumb its depths; and in so doing (we can infer from what Gordon says elsewhere) she will eventually discover that at the wellspring of life flows the spirit of the Holy Ghost. With 'One Against Thebes' Gordon sought to bring together her classical and Christian visions, though the Christianity is barely visible, residing not on the story's surface but in what Gordon saw as its 'primal plot.' Her writing here regains some of the depth and power of her early work, primarily because with it Gordon once again explores the trials and exploits of the hero. By the end of 'One Against Thebes' the young heroine of the story is to Gordon just that--a true heroine, a battler against the evil forces of life. As the title suggests, her efforts resemble those of the ancient heroes who battled the evil forces at Thebes; and her use of archetypes to understand and explore life is the 'way' referred to in the lines from *Oedipus at Colonus*...that serve as the story's epigraph: "That way you shall forever hold this city, / Safe from the men of Thebes, the dragon's sons'."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 114-16

"A story about how a child strives to understand herself in relation to a world defined quite narrowly in terms of age, race, class, and gender [Ironically, this Feminist critic likewise defines the world of Gordon's fiction "quite narrowly in terms of age, race, class, and gender--in terms of political sociology.] These terms oppose the child's desire for an understanding of the natural, spiritual, or supernatural forces she feels around her.... Printed thirty-two years...[after "Summer Dust"]--when, despite her many publications, Gordon had not attained the critical acclaim of many writers...less skillful than herself....

'One Against Thebes' reflects Gordon's subsequent conservatism regarding the value of women's experience, her disillusionment with women's stories, and her valorization of masculine authority and those classical Greek myths that glorify the heroic male. Introducing a new character who will appear many times in subsequent works, Gordon used her own father as a companion for the once-solitary child.... Gordon, as a writer, no longer experiences the child's world as necessarily alien to her father's.... [She is not Politically Correct--not a Feminist--she gets along with her father.]

Using an omniscient narrator rather than a central intelligence, Gordon broadens her focus to include other characters.... As Gordon expands her focus on the community, she more closely observes Aristotelian unities of time and place; not broken into discreet episodes, the new story could hardly be criticized as 'not complete in itself.' Overt sexual symbolism and classical allusions reinforce theme and make more apparent this girl's place in a traditional and...stable society.... The older Gordon chose to develop characters and forces in the environment that shape Sally's identity. Gordon expands Sally's connection to the male

character, Wallace Brewer (formerly Robert), a friend of Sally's brother, but primarily by emphasizing the opinionated voice of the girl's learned father....

As the new title suggests, the protagonist is now seen in relation to Greek heroes and, like Antigone, to her old, authoritative, albeit blind father. Rather than focus on the 'summer dust' that Sally and Son travel through, dust that obscures the child's social and moral journey in a sterile land, Gordon weaves in classical allusions valorized by the father. The epigraph is from *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which the dying and ostracized father, Oedipus, promises to impart wisdom that will keep Theseus safe from the sons of Thebes.... Gordon tempts readers to see Sally as Antigone, the loyal daughter and sister, the last of the 'Epigoni,' late avengers of the father, or perhaps as Theseus, defender of all wronged and vulnerable peoples, who provides refuge to the exiled Oedipus and comfort to the guilt-ridden Heracles. The child's remembrance of her father's preoccupation with ancient myths of Athens and Thebes...is balanced [meaning what?] against her recounting of the story of the fairy godmother's rescue of a little princess in the last pages of Gordon's story....

Emulating her father's speech, the child's words reflect both her and Gordon's acceptance of patriarchal authority and need for protection.... The protagonist's attraction to mothering is evident when she interrupts her reading of the fairy godmother story, first to tend to Leota's child and then to comfort Son.... *Desiring integration with a literary world dominated by men, Gordon would come to accept the cultural and artistic norms of her circle*, while her original protagonist turned toward an alternate world governed by a fairy godmother" [the world preferred by this Feminist, advocating a "woman's culture." Italics added.]

Anne M. Boyle
Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson 2002) 48-50, 53

Anne M. Boyle reduces the influences upon Gordon to the "norms of her circle." As a Feminist without a literary education, Boyle does not recognize that Classicism, expressed in Gordon's use of Greek myths, is a great aesthetic and intellectual tradition over two thousand years old. This tradition was revived in the 18th century as Neoclassicism, which became the aesthetic foundation of Realism in the late 19th century. The traditions of Classicism and Realism are huge, much larger than "her circle" in the 20th century. Boyle belittles Gordon's intellectual range and denies her the intellectual and artistic independence and originality Feminists claim to be advocating for women: "Desiring integration with a literary world dominated by men, Gordon would come to accept the cultural and artistic norms of her circle." As if Gordon, a leader of the revolution in literary analysis called New Criticism, rebelling against the norms of the entire education establishment, was a conformist. In attributing all literary norms to men, Boyle likewise belittles the other best women writers in the tradition of Realism--Chopin, Freeman, Wharton, Cather, Porter, O'Connor and other independent women who were not part of any male "circle."

The best fiction writers of both genders judge their own work in comparison to all the stories they have ever read, including Greek myths, and especially in comparison to the classics, the masterpieces of fiction. The best writers are original, not conformists. It is fair to flip the insult and say that as a Feminist Boyle herself, desiring integration with an academic world dominated by Feminists, would come to accept the cultural and artistic norms of her circle. Furthermore, in disagreeing with the male agrarians she hosted at Benfolly, Gordon actually rebelled *against* the "norms of her circle."

Michael Hollister (2020)